



THE GLASS WIVES

by Amy Sue Nathan

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A Conversation with Amy Sue Nathan

*"It was
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What started your writing career?

I wrote my first book when I was ten; it was a story about sisters, and my favorite Barbie dolls were the main characters. I've been writing ever since, even though a litany of desk jobs kept me pretty busy writing brochures, slide show copy (*actual* slides), and PR material for a small college. After the desk jobs came years as a stay-at-home mom. Then I started "mom-blogging" after my divorce. I wrote about my life, mostly, posts about dating after divorce and being the single mom of two kids who always needed to be in two places at the same time. The blog led to essays and columns published in print and online. Once, I overheard two women talking about an essay in the *Chicago Tribune*. My essay! Lucky for me, they were saying nice things. It was then I knew I wanted to continue pursuing publication and sparking conversations. Then one day, while struggling through an essay, a workshop instructor encouraged me to write fiction. I remembered the days of Barbie stories and wondered why it had taken me so long to go back to what I loved to do.

You mentioned a "workshop instructor." Did you take writing workshops to hone your craft?

I did! Lots of workshops. I'm deadline driven, so the structure of lessons and homework kept me accountable and moving forward with my novel and other writing projects.

How did you come up with the idea for your novel?

Truth was the springboard for *The Glass Wives*. My ex-husband died just a few years after we divorced. Things were bad. Very bad. But then, as time passed, I thought—what if things could be worse? That was the start of my novel. I took my nugget of truth as a divorced mom with a deceased ex-husband and



imagined the myriad ways things could have been worse. What would have to happen? What kind of people would be involved? What would these people do? The widow moving in with the ex-wife topped the list. Once I had the premise, well, things took off from there.

Your book was inspired by a true story. Is anyone in your novel based on a real person?

No, but Rex the dog is based on our first Golden Retriever, Einstein, who was both a genius and a big galumph.

Writers often want to convey a particular point of view as well as tell a story. Was that true for you?

You bet. It was important to me to give a voice to single moms, to explore an unconventional family in a conventional community, and show there are many ways to be a family. Just like for some of my characters, my life did not turn out as I'd planned. As I wrote *The Glass Wives*, I learned along with Evie that things could turn out okay despite being thrown off-track a time or two. Or ten.

How did you choose your characters' names? What about the last name, Glass?

In thinking of a last name for my characters, I knew a few things: I wanted it to be short, Jewish, but not overtly ethnic. I researched Jewish surnames and came up with Glass. It wasn't until afterwards that I realized the additional connotations.

I always loved the name Evie, but I pronounce it EH-vie, so I wasn't sure it was the right choice since most people I know said EE-vie. But when I changed the name to Tracy, and then to Lisa, the names just didn't fit (although I used Lisa for another character). I realized I was writing Evie's story, no matter

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I lose track
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how someone pronounced it. Beth was one of my favorite names growing up, one I always named my dolls, and so that was an easy choice. Laney picked her own name, and if you've read *The Glass Wives*, that won't surprise you.

How did you come up with the title?

I was revising my novel for the umpteenth time and typed the words "the Glass wives" into a scene. I stopped in my tracks. The characters' last name is Glass, so of course it worked on the literal level, but together those two words illustrate the fragility and transparency of their unusual family. I said "the Glass wives" aloud and knew it was the right title for my book. It was literal, it was metaphorical, and it was only about six weeks before my agent took it out on submission. The good timing and title gods were with me that day.

How do your kids feel about your writing?

My son and daughter are incredibly supportive, which means...they let me write. Being a single mom meant I didn't have the luxury of tag-team parenting. When the kids were young, I'd put my laptop on the dining room table and we'd all do our "homework" at the same time. I could be there and help them, and simply be present, while also writing. To save time there were plenty of macaroni and cheese dinners, but I always added peas and carrots for nutrition, although I said it was because the colors added panache.

What do you do when you're not writing?

In the warm weather I'm a sometimes-gardener and have started growing vegetables, although not always with consistent success. Last year I harvested about a bushel of jalapeños, three tomatoes, four zuc-



chini, and enough basil to season a buffet for a small nation. I love to cook but, unlike Evie, I don't like to bake unless it involves a tube of cookie dough. And even then you'll have to convince me it needs to go into the oven.

Most of all, when I'm not writing or doing something writing-related, I want to spend time with my kids. When they're around it's very important that I have no distractions, and it's probably the only time I don't answer my phone. I also have two dogs that require a lot of treats and attention and have no tolerance for deadlines or phone calls.

What are your writing habits?

It was only when I started writing my second novel that I realized I write on my lap and edit at my desk. To write the drafts of a book or story or essay or even a blog post, I need to get comfortable on a favorite chair or sofa or even the bed, prop up the laptop on my lap and just type, preferably near a window. I often lose track of time—maybe that's where the comfort comes in. When I'm revising or editing, I need more structure—my ergonomic chair, a bright desk lamp, pens and pads of paper nearby, strong coffee, and chocolate.

Since I'm a morning person, I have usually answered emails and written blog posts or a first draft of something by seven a.m. When I'm working on multiple projects, which is most of the time, I write fiction in the morning and essays or blog posts in the afternoon. At night I usually do the more technical side of things, like finishing up and scheduling blog posts and making the next day's to-do list or editing if I'm in the groove and can't let go.

About the Author



An Original Essay by the Author

**“What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Stronger
(and Will Certainly Make Its
Way Into Your Novel)”**

*“I wasn’t
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I have always been a reader and a writer. I love to sit with a book from beginning to end, or—second best—carry it around with me throughout a busy day, stealing moments to read a page or even just a paragraph. I love to write, to jot down a random sentence or idea, an usual name, or a bit of dialogue so I don’t forget what I thought, or heard. When I write, I lose track of time. Finding just the right word, or words, is my Sudoku, my crossword puzzle, where everything must fit together perfectly. But even though reading and writing are my passions, there have been times in my life when I just couldn’t read, times when I believed it was self-indulgent to allow my thoughts to drift away, when I couldn’t concentrate on anything other than real life, in real time.

That’s what happened when I divorced. I’d try to write a paragraph or two, but would find that I just didn’t have the energy or the drive to write more. It seemed silly, somehow, to spend precious time caring about fictional people when real people—my children, mostly—needed my attention. Then, just as I grew comfortable watching my children go off with their dad every other weekend, just as I found my footing in the world of online dating, my ex-husband died suddenly. It was a plot worthy of a Movie of the Week. And it was mine. My husband and I may have been divorced for two years, but he was still my children’s father. They were devastated. Which meant that I couldn’t be. I felt irresponsible doing anything that wasn’t directly related to the emotional or physical health of my children. While before I’d simply set reading and writing aside, now I packed



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them away.

But when the dust started to settle in our lives, or at least when that's how it seemed, I began to think about writing again. Others had the same thought, apparently, as friends and acquaintances were now suggesting that I write a book. This unsettled me, and not just because I hadn't written or even read anything longer than a magazine article in years. What was it about my life that people thought so interesting? Was this some sort of literary rubber-necking? Were people so thirsty for the intricate details I didn't share about our tragedies that they wanted me to tease them out in print?

No, thank you.

I wanted—*needed*—to move forward. I did not want to relive or re-create my family's pain on the page. I experienced firsthand how divorce is still big news in a small town, so once single, I coveted privacy. When my ex passed away and my life was once again ball-park chatter, I looked forward to the day when people would ask "What's new?" and I could respond with "Nothing much." When my kids were in school or in the Little League lineup, I felt a reprieve—for me as well as them. Things were far from okay, but "okay" was my goal and I didn't see how I could get there by writing a book about what had happened.

But that idea of writing something—anything—nagged at me. I started reading again and I dabbled in writing essays, blog posts, and short stories. I wrote about my daughter's long-ago preschool penchant for coordinating her own outfits, my son going off to high school, and new family traditions, such as my kids making their dad's favorite foods on Father's Day. But I did not want to write about *what had happened*. Not in any detail. Why would I? Things had been awful. Things were sometimes still awful. -

"There was a story that was bigger than one family in one house in one town."

And that's when it hit me. There was a story that was bigger than one family in one house in one town. I didn't have to write about what happened to us. I could make up things. I could imagine how our misfortune might have been worse. Understanding that prompted an honest-to-goodness breakthrough. *It could have been worse.*

Unlike Evie, my protagonist, I was never in jeopardy of losing the home I lived in with my children. I didn't have to worry about how my sister would react to my decisions because I don't have a sister, and I didn't have to resort to taking in a boarder to make ends meet—especially not one who would rearrange my kitchen cabinets. That's when my novel began to take shape. What if Evie needed help from the least likely, least desirable person to give it: her ex-husband's young widow? Wouldn't that be something. Though my ex-husband did leave behind a widow, she was my age, and we'd become unlikely friends. She wasn't moving into my basement or babysitting for my children, and she certainly wasn't alphabetizing my spices. But in my novel? Well, that was different.

While I could reimagine the emotion and drama of that dark tunnel, there were some things that I couldn't—wouldn't—rework on the page. Circumstances, mainly. Like this one.

I had traveled to Philadelphia to visit friends and family because my kids were headed for a winter break with their dad, stepmom, and teenage step sister. I had learned the hard way not to putter around the house when my kids were on vacation without me. Going away without my kids was healthy. Expected. Necessary. I convinced myself that this time, we'd *all* have fun. But that's not how our story unfolded. Just hours after I'd left my home



near Chicago my ex-husband died from a heart attack. Of course, I flew home right away, but those nine hours when I was not there for my son and daughter—hours when they needed me most—are hours that I still regret more than eight years later. It's a part of our history. Nothing can change that.

But in my novel, Evie goes to the hospital and waits for news. She is the one who tells her kids about their dad's car accident. She is there.

As I had inklings about how things could be different, a story unfolded around me, and within me. I realized the story I needed to write wasn't about me, or my kids, or the third dog we adopted to fill tiny spaces in their hearts. It wasn't about the neighbors who stopped calling because losing a forty-year-old friend to a sudden heart attack filled them with fear that made them retreat. In this fictional world I was creating, Evie's best friends and their husbands do not retreat, they step up. And while most of my friends were steadfast, as life changes, so do friendships.

At the time I wrote *The Glass Wives* it was the only story I *could* write. The things I needed to say were bigger than me or one friend or one family member and any one disappointment or conflict. I wasn't writing to teach anyone a lesson; I was writing to set an example for myself. I filled the first chapter's shiva scene with Evie's extended family because, in real life, while my parents attended my ex's funeral, sat shiva at my ex-husband's house, and stayed with me and my kids for two weeks, the rest of my family was burdened not just by distance, but by some strange divorce protocol they imagined existed. So I didn't do that to Evie or her twins, Sam and Sophie. I couldn't.

Behind the Novel

"Anything is possible."

Most of all, as I started jotting down ideas and writing rough chapters and creating characters, I realized that writing this story was not self-indulgent. I just wanted to show how far a mother, any mother, would go to protect her kids' sense of home and family. I wanted to prove, through Evie's actions—and even through her misgivings and mistakes—that families come in all shapes and sizes. I wanted Evie's family to encourage others to be tolerant and forgiving. I wanted them to question Evie, bristle at her choices, and then to challenge themselves, especially if they thought of their families as normal—round pegs that fit neatly into round holes. I wanted Evie to shatter the illusion of normal. More than that, I wanted to show, albeit in a literary time lapse, that amidst the crushing blow of grief and change, a family can emerge, be whole and strong. Even, or especially, because while writing this novel my own family wasn't always quite at that point. Like most things in real life, we are a work in progress.

In writing *The Glass Wives*, I disassembled what and who I knew, the way someone might take apart an intricate Lego castle and rebuild it, using some of the same pieces, along with some new and different ones. A castle becomes a spaceship, or a dinosaur.

As my kids grew and then crossed into adulthood, all three of us have grown up. I've been published in magazines and newspapers, but to have my debut novel published at age forty-nine fulfills a lifelong dream. This milestone, much more than an item on a bucket list, reinforces for me, and imprints on my children, not only the power of perseverance, but that anything is possible. I also believe that sometimes things happen right when you need them to happen. My daughter heads to college this fall. In a year my son will graduate from college. Right now

we are simultaneously embarking on the dreams we hold dear for ourselves, and for one another.

As I watched my children reclaim their joy and wonder, I'd like to think I've followed their lead. With love and fortitude, I revisited a terrible time in our lives and turned it all upside down in ways that make perfect sense—the way life so often does not. And because planning and hoping and dreaming are once again parts of all of our lives, I was able to write for *The Glass Wives* what we all wish for, but is not always possible.

A happy ending.



Behind the Novel



Recommended Reading

The Red Garden

Alice Hoffman

A little bit of mysticism winds through this novel in stories. And while the story-chapters could stand alone, together they tell the three-hundred-year history of the fictional town of Blackwell, Massachusetts. *The Red Garden* illustrates how people and places transcend time, and how we're all linked to the past and the future. I enjoyed thinking how the little seedlings of my life came from the past and would continue into the future. The book was both inventive and reassuring.

Starting Out in the Evening

Brian Morton

Unusual relationships are the most interesting to read about, and *Starting Out in the Evening* is about a novelist in his seventies and the female graduate student who wants to write her master's thesis about him, thereby restoring him to his former literary stature. There's also the writer's single, middle-aged daughter, who feels displaced by the new person in her father's life. This book is much less about being a novelist or student or daughter than it is about believing you're not all washed up, no matter your age.

A Walk on the Beach

Joan Anderson

This is a self-help book in disguise, which is perfect if you don't read self-help books. This is the story of the author's real-life friendship with Joan Erikson, wife of Erik Erikson, the psychologist who is famous for, among other things, coining the phrase *identity crisis*. I'm sure it is no coincidence that through this friendship it's easy for readers to see how it is



possible, and preferable, to do things for themselves, while still tending to the people around them.

The Crown

Nancy Bilyeau

I had no knowledge of Tudor history when I started reading my first historical thriller, *The Crown*, but Bilyeau's writing allowed me to fall quickly into the rhythm of the period language and to learn history as I went along. The main character, the headstrong and intelligent young nun Joanna Stafford, was an easy character to root for, and as her quest to save the church intensified, it kept me turning pages much faster than I'd ever expected.

Foreskin's Lament

Shalom Auslander

I clamped my hand over my mouth, laughing and in disbelief, while reading Shalom Auslander's irreverent, insightful, sad, yet uproarious memoir about the unwelcome tenets of his Orthodox Jewish upbringing. Think *South Park* with a yarmulke. And a side of bacon.

Tolstoy and the Purple Chair:

My Year of Magical Reading

Nina Sankovitch

Just when I thought I was reading as many books as I could, I came across this memoir chronicling the author's year of reading a book a day for an entire year, and blogging about it. The author used the experience to heal after her sister's death. I was inspired reading about the healing power of books, and also used Sankovitch's list to enhance my own to-be-read pile.

The Fault in Our Stars

John Green

While this book is about teenagers, and was written for teenagers, the characters have wisdom that defies their ages, which makes it the perfect read for adults. The main characters are cancer patients, but this is not a cancer book. It's a book about hope in its rawest form, which makes sense. Adult characters would probably not be this authentic in the same story. You'll need your heart wide open alongside your open box of tissues for this one.



Reading Group Questions

1. *The Glass Wives* begins at shiva, the Jewish mourning ritual, and concludes at the Passover Seder, a combined meal and service commemorating the end of the Israelites' bondage in ancient Egypt. Why do you think the author framed the story between these two significant ceremonies?
2. Throughout the course of the novel, Evie is forced to reconstruct her definition of "family" for the second time after her ex-husband's death. Did this get easier for her as time passed? If so, was there a defining moment or epiphany for Evie?
3. In today's world do you really believe there is such a thing as a so-called normal, or typical, family like the one Evie wanted for her children?
4. Tolstoy famously said that "all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Evie does her best to cultivate a happy family, especially for her children. Do you think she succeeds? Why or why not?
5. Nicole was the other woman before she married Richard Glass. Do you think this makes her a less honest character? At what point in the book does she become a sympathetic character? (Assuming that she does.)
6. Why do you think the author gave the Glass family a dog? What role does Rex play in the book—and in the family?
7. In one scene, Evie reprimands children that are not her own. It's often cited as one of readers' favorite passages. Why do you think this episode is so powerful—and memorable? What does it suggest about Evie's character? Or do you find it's out of character for Evie?

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8. In the book, Evie bakes when she's upset or anxious. Take a moment to list examples of her doing so. Why do you think Evie does this? Moreover, why do you think the author chose to assign this behavior, or quirk, to her protagonist?
9. Some of the characters in *The Glass Wives* are intolerant and impatient. Again: Why do you think the author created characters with negative personality traits in a story about family and friendships? How important—or necessary—is it to include characters who are not readily “likable” in any novel? You may wish to take this opportunity to talk about some of your favorite heroes, or anti-heroes, in literature as well.
10. If you could ask the author anything about *The Glass Wives*—clarification on a plot point, a detail about a particular character, scenes from the cutting-room floor—what would it be? (You may choose to contact the author and ask her yourselves!)